

Poletown Historic District
Hupp Motor Car Company
Milwaukee Ave and Mt. Elliott Ave.
Detroit
Wayne
MI

HABS No. MI-275-11

HABS
MICH
82-DETRO,
37-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON DC, 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

NATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL AND ENGINEERING RECORD
POLETOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT
Hupp Motor Car Company Plant

HABS No. MI-275-11

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MICH,
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37-

(Also known as Great Lakes Sugar & Warehousing Company)

Location:	North of East Milwaukee Avenue, between Moran and Mt. Elliott, Detroit, Michigan
	UTM: 17.332000.4694000 Quad: Highland Park
Date of Construction:	1919 - ca. 1925
Present Owner:	City of Detroit, Department of Community & Economic Development 150 Michigan Avenue Detroit, Michigan 48226
Present Use:	None
Significance:	It served as the major manufacturing plant of the Hupp Motor Car Company from 1915 until 1945, and was one of the largest employers in the Milwaukee Junction industrial district.
Historian:	Charles K. Hyde, April 1981

Robert G. Hupp was one of several early Detroit automakers who achieved moderate success, but was ultimately unable to compete against Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler. He began working as a common laborer at the Olds Motor Works in Detroit in 1902. Hupp and E.A. Nelson, a stylist with Packard, decided to build a high-quality, medium-size automobile and they launched the Hupp Motor Car Company on November 8, 1908, with a capitalization of only \$25,000. Charles D. Hastings, who invested \$8,500 in the new firm, became general manager in 1910 and Robert Hupp left the company the following year. The four-cylinder Hupmobile was an immediate success. Production amounted to 500 cars in 1909, but the next year jumped to 5,340 and to 12,543 units by 1913, making Hupp one of the larger producers, although still small compared to Ford, who turned out 182,000 cars in 1913. When the firm reincorporated as the Hupp Motor Car Corporation in November 1915, the owners increased the capital stock to \$6.5 million. The company started in a small factory on Bellevue Avenue, but moved to a larger plant on nearby East Jefferson in 1911. Both factories were located on Detroit's east side in a congested industrial district extending along the Detroit River. By 1915, Hupp had completed the first segments of a new complex on East Milwaukee Avenue at Mt. Elliott, in the rapidly-developing Milwaukee Junction industrial district, and it served as the company's main plant for three decades.¹

The Milwaukee Avenue facility initially consisted of a large, sprawling four-story brick building with several wings, plus a brick powerhouse. About 1,700 worked there by 1919 and the facility became increasingly overcrowded as production rose.² The company added six interconnected four-story reinforced concrete buildings in 1919-1922, giving the complex a total of about 1.6 million square feet of floorspace. The Detroit architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls designed these additions and Everitt Winter served as the general contractor.³ With the new facilities, the Hupp Corporation increased

production from 15,000 units in 1921 to 38,000 in 1923.⁴ Although the company had achieved great success with a four-cylinder model, it launched the Straight Eight Hupmobile in January 1925 and sold 15,000 the first year. In October 1925, the company replaced its four with a new six-cylinder car and sold over 8,000 of the new model in the closing months of 1925. In the same year, Hupp also shifted all body work, including trimming and painting, out of the Milwaukee Avenue plant in order to free space for the new models.⁵ DuBois Young, who had joined Hupp in 1915 as vice president for manufacturing and became president in 1926, was the driving force behind these changes. Hupp's sales reached 50,374 cars in 1929, but then plummeted to 17,450 in 1931.⁶

The Hupmobile underwent several styling changes during the 1930s, but nothing seemed to revive consumer interest. Hupp sales had peaked at \$53 million in 1929, but slid to a low of \$6 million in 1935.⁷ The company suspended production for part of 1936 because of depressed sales, but then produced cars until 1941, when it converted the plant to war production.⁸ At the end of the war, the company's directors decided not to resume automobile production and changed the firm's name to the Hupp Corporation. William S. Knudsen from General Motors became chairman of the board at Hupp and the company diversified into electronics and kitchen appliances.⁹ Midland Steel Products Company bought the complex in 1950 and demolished the large brick building on Mt. Elliott in 1956 to create parking space.¹⁰ The Michigan Metal Processing Company occupied the plant in the early 1960s before the Great Lakes Sugar & Warehousing Company used the remaining buildings to store bulk sugar from 1968 through 1980.¹¹

Seven similar interconnected buildings were extant in early 1981. The major manufacturing area consisted of a building running north and south (Building 6), with four perpendicular wings (separated from each other by open courts) extending westerly and identified as Buildings 7-10, from south to

north. Building 6 was a four-story reinforced concrete structure 85 feet by 416 feet, with a flat slab framing system and three rows of mushroom columns on each floor. Buildings 7 and 8 were of similar design, 74 feet wide and 397 feet long, with two rows of mushroom columns, 14-foot ceilings, and aisles 21 feet wide. These three buildings were completed in 1919-1920, designed by Smith, Hinchman & Grylls.¹² Hupp added two more wings (Buildings 9 and 10) in 1922, identical to Buildings 7 and 8 and running perpendicular to Number 6. The new buildings replaced two large single-story steel-framed buildings at the same location.¹³ At the western end of the complex, three concrete passageways crossed the 41-foot courts separating Buildings 7-10, thus connecting them at that end. The 1922 expansion included a four-story reinforced concrete building (Number 11), 53 feet wide and 339 feet long, running north and south, perpendicular to the north facade of Building 10. The first floor of Building 11 was a railroad loading platform serving two tracks. There were no internal columns in this building because clear-span reinforced concrete beams supported the floors.

There were two 50,000 gallon steel water tanks on the roof of Building 6, both atop concrete towers, as well as a total of nine heavy-duty freight elevators. All of these buildings look the same, with concrete floors, steel sash, and brick facades. At some point in the mid-1920s, Hupp added a steel-framed fifth story with 20-foot ceilings to Buildings 7-10, but reproduced the existing architectural style on the major facades. The oldest building extant in 1981 was the rectangular brick powerhouse (Building 12), 55 feet wide and 99 feet long, built in 1915. Three steel smokestacks were standing, supported by guy wires, and the two largest stacks appear to be original.¹⁴ Two long-disused coal-fired vertical boilers, with no nameplates, were still in place in 1981.

The Milwaukee Avenue plant of the Hupp Motor Car Company is a good example of a medium-size manufacturing complex developed by one of the more significant Detroit car companies during the booming 1910s and 1920s. Hupp was among a handful of companies to achieve any prolonged success, in part because it found a niche in the marketplace, at least for a while. Hupp remained a tiny producer compared to the Big Three or even compared to the largest independents like Packard, which also ultimately failed. Hupp's move to this site and the subsequent plant expansion was repeated by dozens of other firms which had located in this booming industrial district of Detroit best known as the Milwaukee Junction. Hupp was the second-largest employer in the district during the 1920s, surpassed only by Dodge Main.

NOTES

¹Clarence M. Burton, The City of Detroit, Michigan, 1701-1922, I (Detroit, 1922), p. 583: "Detroit, The Automobile City," Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal, XIV (December 1, 1909), pp. 135-136; "The Automobile Industry in Michigan," Michigan History Magazine, VIII (1924), pp. 247-251; Allan Nevins, Ford: The Times, The Man, the Company (New York, 1954), pp. 488-489; and The World of Automobiles: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Motor Car, IX (New York, 1974), n.p.

²Burton, The City of Detroit, I, p. 583.

³The Detroider, XI (February 28, 1920), p. 21 and Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, architectural drawings, Job Number 4202 (8-8-1919) and Job Number 4356 (12-6-1919).

⁴"The Automobile Industry in Michigan," pp. 248-252.

⁵Hupp Motor Car Corporation, Annual Statement, December 31, 1925, located in the Automotive History Collection of the Detroit Public Library. At that time, the company owned a stamping plant in Detroit and a body plant in Racine, Wisconsin.

⁶The World of Automobiles, IX.

⁷Detroit News, February 6, 1956 and March 6, 1956.

⁸The World of Automobiles, IX.

⁹Hupp Corporation, Annual Report to the Stockholders For 1946, in the Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library.

¹⁰Detroit News, February 6, 1956 and March 6, 1956.

¹¹Polk's Detroit City Directory, 1957-1980, passim.

¹²Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, architectural drawings, Job Number 4202 (8-8-1919) and Job Number 4356 (12-6-1919).

¹³Burton, The City of Detroit, I, p. 593.

¹⁴Ibid.